

Patchworks

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Patchworks

by [CalicoCat](#)

Summary

A frankly inexplicable collection of angst and humor from my Tumblr posts.

Faceted

Chapter Summary

On the crystal collections of young ladies.

It was only a shoebox, but Ryuko held it out so hopefully, so tentatively, that any feelings of superiority were submerged beneath the waves of sisterly tenderness. *Of course* it was only a shoebox, Satsuki reasoned, anything her sister had of value would have been destroyed along with the Matoi residence. But to have recreated even a small collection in the time she'd had available was worthy in itself, signature of a determination thoroughly characteristic of her lineage.

Satsuki lifted the lid respectfully, with all deference to the powerful Sapphic energies that lurked within, and her eyes opened wide in surprise. She reached inside and carefully removed a stout plastic container, lid perforated, such as you'd find in a kitchen.

“And this is?” she asked quietly.

“Salt.”

“I know what it is.”

“Salt is a crystal.” Ryuko, for once, seemed uncertain.

“That it is, dear Ryuko. And these?” Satsuki removed some small, white cubes from the box, a centimeter on a side.

“Sugar cubes.”

“Sugar is also a crystal, I suppose.” She did her best to push thoughts of her own collection, the satin-lined cherry wood box packed with precisely-cut moonstone, amethyst and jade, from her mind.

There was something pink, more promising in color, shape and uniformity, within the box and Satsuki removed it, acknowledging the satisfaction on Ryuko's face.

“Glass,” Ryuko said proudly.

“Strictly speaking, glass is an amorphous solid: closer, in this case, to a liquid than a crystal.” Satsuki couldn't help but adopt the tone of the schoolteacher for a moment.

Ryuko stared at her, and then her mouth opened in a goofy grin.

“Liquid? Good one, Sats! You had me going for a moment, but even Mako wouldn't fall for that.” She punched her sister affectionately on the arm. “Yeah, you have to get up pretty early in the morning to get one over on Ryuko Matoi!”

Satsuki lifted a last, small object from the box and held it up to the light. The color was deep red, the edges precisely cut. Ryuko smiled as Satsuki turned it between her fingers.

“The pride of my collection.”

The universe paused, awaiting her *onee-sama's* approval.

“It's a die, Ryuko.”

The younger woman was confused.

“Are you sure?”

“You can see where the numbers have been rubbed of the faces.”

The confusion became disconsolation, and Satsuki saw the need for a sisterly gesture of solidarity.

“Oh, Ryuko...”

She pulled her little sister close, feeling Ryuko stiffen and then relax into the embrace. Her lips went to Ryuko's ear, and she felt the warmth of a blush as the words surged within her, the three little words she'd longed to speak, ever since the mysterious guitar-case drifter had appeared at Honnouji Academy, ScissorBlade clutched in her hand.

“... you useless lesbian.”

Red-Shifted

Chapter Summary

In the same universe as [this](#), perhaps.

She'd made the wine herself, though over millennia of carelessness she'd killed most of the vines she'd brought with her. But those that remained, however, were the hardiest of the hard, and with a century of effort during her *vigneron* phase, and the judicious addition of soils from some of the bodies that had punctuated her travels, she'd finally made something that was better than just drinkable.

Reds for preference, of course.

It would have been better to take the wine outside, but while the infinite expanse of nothingness was familiar, even comforting for her now, it was a world that wasn't so kind to the gifts of Bacchus. Her intellectual side, the part of her that had grown strident and controlling with the passage of time, had known that taking the liquid outside would lead to instantaneous boiling, but a little voice within her had said "Do it", and since it was the voice of chaos that had been silent so long, she'd done as it asked and watched as the fruits of her labor bubbled energetically out of existence.

It was only when she came back inside that she realized she'd given herself a burgundy tint – the escaping vapor coating her from head to toe.

When she next slept she dreamt that someone licked the wine from her body: long dark hair moving in sticky serpentine trails across her stomach.

She wasted an entire case of her best efforts trying to recreate that feeling.

It required little more than a thought, and she edged her vessel through the accretion disk, closer and closer to the point where information disappears forever. The black hole was ancient, massive upon massive, and time slowed slowly here – you could stretch out seconds twofold, threefold with a light application of thrust. The temptation was always there, though, the temptation to push just that little bit further and drop into the space beyond time, to grasp at the hope of looping back on herself.

But... There were plenty worse places to end up than this. And sometimes the odds of scooping a bright memory out of a lake of darkness meant it just wasn't worth the risk.

So she watched as the chronometer showed local time drifting further away from Earth time, seconds becoming first lifetimes, and then the rise and fall of great empires. Super-heated matter scattered and rolled about her passage, bright trails of orange and white that flared away into extinction in the ultra-violet. Pyrotechnics for a lone observer.

She raised the glass to her lips, and dwelled on the sip for ten thousand years.

“Happy New Year, Sis.”

Haiku on Incognito Browsing

*Ryuko “Doesn’t know
how to delete her browser
history” Matoi*

Haiku on Strange Bedfellows

*What's in Ryuko's bed?
Student Council President
Dakimakura*

Once-san Saw Everything

Chapter Summary

On breaking into your sister's study.

The house was empty, or so they thought, but nonetheless two miscreants were at pains to traverse the corridor as stealthily as possible. The pathfinder – taller, more athletic, unruly black hair offset by a bright red fringe – stopped abruptly, causing her companion to run clumsily into her.

“Sorry, Ryuko-chan! I didn’t see you!”

Ryuko looked back; the reason for the impact was clear enough – a black beanie pulled down all the way to Mako’s chin.

“D’you have to wear that?”

“But I’m a *shinobi*, Ryuko-chan!”

The doors that Ryuko had stopped by were locked, but that wasn’t unexpected. Crouching by the keyhole, Ryuko yanked a single red hair from her fringe.

“If Satsuki-sama finds us here, won’t we get in trouble?” Mako’s customary optimism was, for once, seasoned with a dash of self-preservation.

“She’s not gonna find us,” Ryuko pushed the hair into the keyhole and turned it back and forth. “She’s reviewin’ the company accounts. We’ve got at least half an hour.”

The hair moved through the lock, probing like an earthworm. Ryuko could feel, just about, the shift in pressure as each pin in turn lined up against the tumbler.

Harden, she thought, and the hair went rigid as she twisted it in the lock. The door to the inner sanctum opened, and the pair slipped inside, closing the door quietly behind them.

“Satsuki-sama’s study...” Mako had pulled the beanie into a more usual position, the better to appreciate the fabled location.

It has to be here somewhere. Ryuko worked her way carefully through each cupboard in turn, until finally a door opened to reveal starched blinding whiteness within. There was nothing alien, or otherworldly about its contents, but it still held a mystical authority all its own. Sneakers, jeans and t-shirt were quickly discarded and Ryuko pulled the Student Council President’s uniform off its hangar and slipped it on.

“Damn, loose in all the wrong places.” It sagged a little in the bust and in the seat of the pants.

Mako’s eyes widened.

“Satsuki-sama really does have bigger boobs than you, Ryuko-chan!”

But Ryuko was busy, tilting an elegant lamp so it would backlight her, and positioning a chair ready to climb on.

“Got your phone with you?” Mako nodded as Ryuko wobbled on the chair, trying to strike a suitably commanding pose with the plastic sword they’d found in a 100 Yen store.

This is gonna look so great on my Myspace! Satsuki’s gonna die when she sees it!

“ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK!!”

The camera flash left a false-color afterimage of the room, and Ryuko tried to think of something else, something suitably Satsuki to say.

“TEMPURA IS TONKATSU!!”

Mako rocked with laughter for a moment, then looked up quizzically.

“But Ryuko-chan, tempura isn’t tonkatsu. I don’t understand!”

An imperious gaze was directed downwards.

“Don’t tell me you thought what Sis said ever made any sense...”

There was the sound of creaking wood, like the flexing of the hull of a galleon in a tempest, and since Soroi still punctiliously oiled the doors throughout the mansion, it could only have come from someone gripping and twisting the handle with such force that the door was all but being torn from its hinges.

“Matoi...”



*Onee-san
saw
every-thing*

Small Caps

Chapter Summary

If it were a chance to see her again, you'd take it, wouldn't you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The figure in black was tall and slim, with slender white fingers that held the artifacts carefully but without a hint of tremor.

SCYTHE OR SWORD?

“I get a choice?” The woman raised a shapely eyebrow. “I thought the scythe was more traditional in your... part of the world,” and then quietly, “wherever that is.”

I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT DIVERSITY IS IMPORTANT.

She weighed her options for a moment. A scythe would afford her the opportunity to master new techniques, but even so...

“Sword, then.”

AS YOU WISH.

The cloaked figure proffered the chosen weapon, a knight's longsword of traditional European design, but when the woman turned it gently in her hand she realized it had become a beautiful katana of quite exquisite workmanship. It should have been weighty, difficult to lift, but the aches and arthritis that had plagued her for decades had lifted. She felt restored, young again, and when she ran her fingers through her hair she saw black, not silver.

The tall figure started to walk away, through a shifting fog of shelves and passageways. The woman hurried after it.

“I thought there was only one...” she hesitated, “one with your responsibilities.”

I BELIEVE THE TERM IS ‘FRANCHISE’.

“Then why me?”

The figure stopped and turned back towards her.

DO YOU DENY THAT YOU HAVE ALWAYS DONE THE DIFFICULT, NECESSARY THING? EVEN WHEN THE WORLD WOULD HATE YOU FOR IT?

The woman hung her head slightly.

“I’ve done terrible... unforgiveable, things.”

BUT YOU NEVER STOPPED CARING FOR PEOPLE. ALL PEOPLE. AND THAT IS IMPORTANT.

He, or she, or it, or they, started to walk again. Just before fading into the fog the figure stopped one last time and looked back. The woman – a young woman, young once again – watched two pinpoints of light twinkle, bright like blue giants in the depths of space.

AND YOU WERE ALWAYS KIND TO CATS. AND DOGS. SNAKES, MONKEYS AND TOADS. AND THAT IS ALSO IMPORTANT. I HAVE THE UTMOST CONFIDENCE IN YOU.

The figure became indistinct in the distance.

AND YOU MIGHT CONSIDER USING THE VOICE, FOR TRADITION’S SAKE. IT WOULD BE APPRECIATED.

The woman looked at the sword, and the plain robe she was wearing. Black. That was more her sister’s color than hers, but the cut was refreshingly modest. It didn’t encumber her either. Acceptable.

She realized she was in something like a library, or a storeroom – shelf upon shelf stretching out into the dark of the distance, each lined with hourglasses. She ran her finger along the woodwork, tracing the names on the plaques beneath each glass vessel. There were familiar names there – and that caused some momentary pangs of sadness – it was too late for her to be there for them, at their ends. But there were so many she could still help on the next stage of their journey. And there was one in particular.

She walked for a while, which might have been minutes or might have been centuries. When she found what she’d been searching for it was surprisingly nondescript: no larger than the others, no more ornate. Looking inside, though, she didn’t see the fine white sand she’d seen in the other hourglasses; instead the upper bulb was filled with a single, continuous red fiber that swirled and writhed with a life of its own. It was gradually flowing into the lower bulb, but even after the length of a normal human life it had scarcely emerged from the narrow neck of the vessel.

She ran her fingers gently down the curve of the glass.

MATOI RYUKO.

She smiled at the sound of her own voice as it echoed in her mind and the infinite spaces around her. It would be good to see her sister again, even if it might not be for a while. Kiryuin Satsuki gathered up a few of the hourglasses whose sand was almost spent and strode purposefully off between the shelves. In the meantime there was work to be done, and plenty to keep her occupied.

Chapter End Notes

Respectfully *in memoriam*: Sir Terry Pratchett, 1948-2015.

Evening Dress For Sale: Only Worn Once

Chapter Summary

Why Ryuko prefers suits for formal occasions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

How can she stand more than one of these things a year?

A statuesque figure in white was moving gracefully between the guests, conversing effortlessly in Japanese, English and a mix of other languages. There were dignitaries and ministers: the great and the good, and in some cases the not-so-good. And Satsuki Kiryuin greeted each with surprisingly convincing warmth, bowing or shaking hands as national custom dictated, and even accepting a kiss on each cheek with apparent equanimity.

Lurking off to the side of the throng a figure in a red dress pulled a face. She'd killed some time by loitering in the toilets, but the drink never seemed to make it that far (she'd have a word with the caterers about that), and people had begun to stare. Ryuko Matoi jiggled a little on the spot, and tried to shift her dress into a better position. *These outfits...* Iori had gone to the trouble of making her a suit: smart, perfectly tailored, something that made her look, well, *dashing*, but Satsuki had vetoed it on this one occasion: just this once. Receptions in the National Diet Building were apparently too conservative to countenance a young woman in a suit; the total collapse of Japanese society would doubtless immediately follow. So off-the-shelf evening wear it was then, something elegant and expensive in red that should have shown off all her best points (aside from her amazing wit, of course) and which instead contrived to turn shapeless and unflattering as soon as she put it on.

And heels!

Senketsu had had heels, she knew that, at least when the two of them were synchronized, but she'd had no more trouble with those than she had with walking on tip-toes. These things, however... They seemed to have a rebellious, unstable life all their own. Ryuko looked down at the shining (now slightly scuffed) leather. *Well, at least they don't have laces – that's something.* She sighed for a moment; Satsuki somehow seemed to glide in heels, where she could only totter. Even Nonon seemed better able to convey herself elegantly in evening wear.

Stands to reason. Her center of gravity's lower.

Ryuko chuckled to herself, making a note to repeat the witticism as soon as the opportunity arose, but right then even talking to her perpetual antagonist would have been a welcome distraction. She craned her neck briefly and scanned the room; Gamagoori was easily visible

in one of the corners, a man-mountain in a tux with a bleached blonde summit, but Mako was nowhere to be seen. Either she was hemmed-in by admirers, or she'd found the kitchens. Ryuko knew which she'd put her money on.

Still, it wasn't all bad. The champagne was free, and good (as good as fizzy grape juice could be), and since she'd emerged from the toilets she'd started to attract glances as people passed. Maybe she'd set a heart or two fluttering that evening.

She felt hands gently at her waist, behind her, and Ryuko began to turn with a smile.

"Mako, don't make the big lug jeal..."

But it was blinding white that came into view, not pastel pink: a cascade of black hair with the sheen of rare inks, familiar penetrating blue eyes. Ryuko's heart thumped like a lump of lead being dropped on the polished marble floor.

"S-S-S-Sats..." The syllables tumbled chaotically.

Satsuki brought her mouth close to her sister's ear, and as she did so the long hair brushed slowly against Ryuko's bare back and shoulders, sending a *tsunami* of goosebumps down her arms.

Why now of all times? Why here of all places?

Her gaze was now locked forward, terrified that the slightest movement might cause her knees to buckle, or worse yet, that Satsuki would let go of her.

"Ryuko..." The word wasn't even a whisper, just the breath of a thought trapped in the air between lips and ear.

The long, slender fingers moved sensuously downwards from Ryuko's waist, and the room began to spin. Surely it was just how much she'd drunk, and not... anything else. The fingers paused for a moment at her hips, resting gently at the base of her spine, and then they pulled downwards sharply.

"... your dress was hitched up in your *shimapan*."

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by herokick's wonderful [art](#)

High Fiber Diet

Chapter Summary

On the nature of advanced composites.

“It’s kinda beautiful.”

The object was ancient, older than *homo sapiens*, recovered from deep beneath the polar ice by the Kiryuin Conglomerate scientific expedition.

“But it’s dangerous.”

Satsuki pushed back the hood of her parka and lifted her goggles. The artefact was all stellated surfaces and sinuous curves, something far beyond the comprehension of the 21st century.

“Far too dangerous to fall into the hands of the imprudent or ill-intentioned.”

Probe or weapon, ceremonial or artistic treasure, if the object’s function was unknown then its material composition was fully, worryingly apparent. The red light of the elemental analysis system beat a steady warning.

“Ultra-hardened life fibers.”

Ryuko unclipped the plastic lid of a nearby container and drew out a beige-brown ellipsoid, a foot long and perhaps a third that in cross section.

“Indeed,” replied her sister. “Near indestructible. Harder than any material humanity has yet encountered.”

Ryuko tossed her new acquisition lightly from hand to hand, and then suddenly brought it down with super-luminal speed, smashing the strange relic into shimmering fragments that danced for a moment under the strip lights before coming to a halt.

“Except for the crust of week-old stale sourdough, Sis.”

“Certainly... Except for the crust of stale sourdough, Ryuko.”

Silent Conversations

Chapter Summary

When words aren't necessary.

Chapter Notes

More from the Wire Cutter AU.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I don't think she can hear us, dear.”

“The poor thing... Do you think she's one of those deaf-mutes?”

The elderly couple had been staring at her for ten minutes or so. She hadn't paid much attention when they approached, had just waved them into the empty seats opposite her without considering whether an unvoiced question was being asked. But after a few minutes she noticed the slight movement of the lips, the occasional glimpse of tongue pressing against teeth, the tiny signals like someone twitching while they dreamt. Looking down at her jacket, she realized that the lapel had turned over when she'd sat. So she carefully unfolded it, revealing the little blue and white badge: a series of concentric quarter-circles with crossed lines drawn boldly through them, an internationally-recognized sign requesting assistance.

I do not have wireless. Please use verbal communication.

The old man looked briefly at the lady beside him – his wife, Satsuki presumed – and then nodded sagely.

“We thought you might be deaf,” he remarked.

Satsuki made an awkward, embarrassed little smile, but which seemed to be mistaken for confusion by the couple.

“HE SAID: WE THOUGHT YOU MIGHT BE DEAF,” the old lady spoke loudly and clearly, causing other people in the little café to turn momentarily. Satsuki gave a more fulsome smile of understanding.

“Not at all. Merely a faulty wireless radio.”

There was nodded agreement from across the table. There'd been some scandal recently, hadn't there? A class action suit or some such. Public apologies. Heads had rolled.

"And you can't get a replacement?"

She gave a gentle shrug.

"I've been informed that I will have to wait until all the legal formalities have been concluded."

"That must be terrible for you."

The old lady squeezed her hand gently, and Satsuki could see where some of the joints had been replaced: polished composite doing duty in the place of arthritic bone and cartilage.

"We wouldn't know what to do without our implants, would we dear?"

The man laughed broadly: a charming, expansive sound like an innkeeper in a period drama.

"We wouldn't even be able to get ourselves onto the right bus, haha!"

The lady seemed genuinely concerned for Satsuki's welfare, and squeezed her hand again.

"It must be so difficult for you, not having access to the Wired." She settled affectionately back against the man – definitely her husband; Satsuki could see the matching rings now. "I can hardly remember what it was like to forget things."

It was strangely calming to sit with them and listen to them talk; they were like archetypes of generous, caring grandparents, which was, in itself, something of a novelty for Satsuki. They bought her another coffee, and a delicious, delicately formed confection of red bean paste and chestnut, and when she'd fumbled for the worn notes in her purse they'd dismissed her attempts at remuneration with smiles but also a good deal of firmness.

"Save it, and treat yourself," advised the old man.

"Can't you at least have something done about your eyesight?" The lady pressed Satsuki's glasses carefully back onto the bridge of her nose. "My husband used to work at Nikon; they gave us both new sets as a retirement gift."

The man leant forward, teasing open wrinkled eyelids with thumb and forefinger. Satsuki could see now that the iris was brilliant grey, with delicate inclusions of white and black like marbling. As she moved slightly side to side, enjoying the way the shades and patterns shifted, holographic text came in and out of view: *Nikkor Cybr-F*. The old man clearly must have been appreciated by his employer: the lenses were almost as sophisticated as the military-grade optics Ryuko preferred.

"I've been meaning to, but..."

The old man gently released his eyelids, and blinked a few times, letting them settle back into position; then he took his wife's hand and looked at her with a surprisingly wicked little

smile.

“Still, there’s something to be said for a girl with glasses; just like you had when we married.”

“Dear, please...” Weathered cheeks flushed pink, and for a moment the years dropped away from the both of them. “What was that poem you used to read me...?”

Satsuki could see his lips move again: a little physical tell of commands and search strings being formulated.

“Just let me see...” He paused for a moment. “*In the sea of ivy clothed Iwami...*” Satsuki picked up as he fumbled for the next stanza:

*In the sea of ivy clothed Iwami
Near the cape of Kara,
The deep sea miru weed
Grows on the sunken reefs;
The jeweled sea tangle
Grows on the rocky foreshore.
Swaying like the jeweled sea tangle
My girl would lie with me,
My girl whom I love with a love
Deep as the miru growing ocean.*

She paused to find the elderly couple staring at her; there seemed to be a faint sheen of moisture across the optical perfection of the woman’s eyes.

“We thought you couldn’t...”

Satsuki bowed a little in embarrassment.

“I must have read it once. I am blessed with a good memory.”

Before they could respond, a rough hand slapped her across the shoulder from behind.

“Oi, oi, Kiryuin! What up? Ya borin’ these folks with yer crazy stories?”

Satsuki looked up to find Ryuko grinning cheerfully down at her.

“Ah, Matoi. Impeccable timing, as always.” She began to rise. “Please accept my apologies, but I must take my leave.” A deep respectful bow that the couple struggled to return from where they were seated. “And my thanks for the coffee and the cake.”

Ryuko looked enviously down at the empty plate.

“Cake, eh?”

Then she looked across at the couple, her brow furrowing ever so slightly.

“Didn’t bore ya, did she?”

“Not at all. We were grateful for the company.”

“It must be very difficult for her, but she deals with it so well.”

“Yeah, she’s a real trooper.”

“You should take care of her. She’s a keeper, that one.”

“I know.”

Ryuko winked at the old woman, and helped pull Satsuki to her feet. Together, they began to walk towards the ticket gates for the metro.

The concourse was beginning to crowd a little with early evening commuters, but Ryuko’s tuneless whistling and confident swagger maintained a little bubble of space around the two of them. She couldn’t help but glance to the side from time to time; her sister was smiling slightly, an enigmatic curve of the lips which might have been happiness, or sadness, or most likely some unfathomable mix of the two. There was no harm in asking, was there?

She punched Satsuki playfully on the arm, grinning slyly; it was affectionate, but a good deal harder than an average person would have been comfortable with. Ryuko started to swing again, but before the fist could contact Satsuki’s upper arm and leave a bruise on muscular and lean biceps, Satsuki briskly brought up her other arm and halted the punch with her open palm. She held it like that for a moment, then wrapped her fingers around Ryuko’s fist and squeezed for a moment before letting it drop back down.

“Yer OK?”

“Perfectly. Thank you.”

Words and wireless weren’t the only way to express your feelings.

The poem is from the first of "Three Naga Uta" by Hitomaro.

The Diva and the Delinquent

Chapter Summary

Songs we remember from our youth.

The line had formed the night before, snaking backwards and forwards on itself through the open lots in front of the stadium. There were no sleeping bags, but there was a lazy undulation of colorful blankets and neon parkas because under a clear sky even the summer nights, here in the north, could turn suddenly cold.

At 7 A.M. precisely the doors opened and the line began to shuffle forward. There were twelve hours until the concert began in earnest, and most likely another two still until *she* appeared on stage, but years of experience had taught the organizers to be conservative. Even as single fans and family groups clutching posters filed in through the doors, their numbers were replaced – two, three times over – by those beginning to stream from the nearby subway station and the local transit stops. The channels sketched by interdigitated metal barriers smoothly began to fill, white-gloved ushers directing the tides of humanity, balancing the pressure of the surging crowds: hand by hand, heart by heart.

She hadn't anything better to do, or that was what she told herself. There was no one waiting for her back in the one bed apartment she called – for the moment, at least – home, though there was a bra two sizes too large desiccating on the bathroom radiator and a pair of jeans still draped over the balcony railing from where Shizuku had stormed out a week ago.

She'd be back. Or not. After a while they all merged, one into another. Blondes or brunettes. Beach-tanned skin or pale ivory. It wasn't that it didn't matter, but in the end it was just another burden to bear. And when you'd carried the hopes and fears of the world on your shoulders, one more life was little more than featherweight.

The girl tapped her foot impatiently, and those around her shifted slightly, giving her a modicum of additional space. She was out of place here – a hard rock chick among polychrome ephemera – and a funnel cloud of attention hovered over her. Security guards kept articulated limbs lightly over stun batons and handcuffs, though they'd have been of little use had she really wanted the dragon inside of her to let loose.

Ahead of her, beyond families and fans and seemingly sat at a simple trestle table, the singer nodded cheerfully and accepted photo opportunities without complaint. A robot arm – something functional and elegant from a precision manufacturing facility near the capital – swept down and across, again and again, writing her signature fluidly over the programs and posters that were put before her. One or two people even had transparent acrylic CD cases – these were in fashion again, the old made new, just as a few years previously the crowds had clutched card sleeves and vinyl picture discs. Massless fingers brushed nostalgically over the

surface of familiar album covers, and dancing photons scattered turquoise cheerfully off the table surface as the singer's hair flowed around her in slow-motion: the simple physics of another world.

Time passed. Pleasantries were exchanged. The line grew shorter.

"And what would you like me to write?" The smile was as unforced and earnest as it had been for the preceding hundred supplicants.

"Whatever ya like."

The girl's jacket was worn but fashionable, endearingly retro. A little *too* worn to be valuable though.

The robot arm swung gently back and forth, uncertain, claws opening and closing like a heartbeat, and then moved with purpose. The girl bit her lower lip sharply when its mechanical digits deftly lifted a calligraphy brush from the little stand, ignoring the pens and Copic markers arrayed nearby. It dipped into an ink-well of shimmering black and then moved gracefully across the evening's program, drawing out the name that was the first sound of the world yet to come.

The noise of the crowd died around them as the acoustic drivers ringing the table established a compact field of anti-sound that encompassed them both. The hologram continued to animate cheerfully as though engaged in discussing the minutiae of fandom with the young woman in front of her, but the voice – audible only to the two of them – was strangely thoughtful.

"I've seen you before." It echoed with the weight of a whisper in a cathedral.

Behind the table, precision optics on the tall, obsidian tower that was the singer's "body" focused and re-focused, their lenses playing a fugue in depth of field. Twenty Leica eyes watched, patient and unblinking.

"Mebbe." The girl shrugged. "Been before. Few years back."

There was a pause then – one bar at 120 beats per minute – enough for the singer to get a good look at the girl standing before her. Unruly and striking; dark hair with a bright arc of red. Not dyed, it was as though shining crimson fibers had been stitched into her fringe. Iridescent and full of life, full of light, and almost like the singer's own. Something you'd not forget in a hurry, even if your memories weren't backed-up nightly into a vast data center fathoms down in the Sea of Japan.

"About fifty years ago, I'd say."

A semi-breve of silence, disturbed only by the suppressed murmur and movement of the crowd around them.

"Must've been my mom." That seemed unlikely, all things considered, and the girl continued quickly. "Or Granny."

“Sure.” There was a sound like a knowing chuckle that reverberated around them both. “You don’t look seventy, after all.”

It was difficult not to look around for the person whispering to her, the voice had a breathy sparkle that made her heart skip, but the girl did her best to keep her attention on the shining figure seated at the table.

“Could say the same ’bout you.”

The sigh was very close to her ear, as close as she’d felt anyone for a very long time.

“I’ve been sixteen for longer than I can remember.”

The holographic smile remained carefree for the benefit of the pressing crowds, but the eyes were old and melancholy, ancient jade.

“We have the same problem, you and I.”

The girl shifted nervously. It had been a mistake to come here... She hadn’t considered she might be recognized...

“Ya reckon?”

Another rest. Another silence. The conductor’s baton was raised. The voice came in again, *pianissimo*.

“We leave everyone we care about behind.”

Between the two of them they’d lived more than two hundred years, but those few seconds stretched out longer still, it seemed. Neither seemed willing to break the silence, until...

“So – you play the guitar?”

The lenses whirled gently again as they focused on callused fingertips.

“Huh. I can hold a tune.”

There was the barest flicker of a wink.

“You’ve had plenty of time to practice, I imagine.”

She let the comment slide. Throwing a punch would have been pointless, and the singer’s half-smile was familiar somehow: she was joking *with* her, and not at her expense. It was the same smile she’d seen long ago: on someone for whom wit and eloquence came easily, and who found simple humor sometimes a mystery.

“If you fancy touring sometime,” the blue-green eyes were playful, “drop me a mail. I’m always on the lookout for musicians with... longevity.”

For an instant, the girl was surprised. It was normally her that took the initiative.

“Where should I...?”

“Send it? Anywhere will do.” The holographic figure waved a hand lazily, then paused, and for a moment the girl felt the weight of a measureless machine intellect. She shivered slightly. “I’ll see it, regardless.”

There was a tug on the hem of her jacket, and when she looked behind her she found a young girl in a brand-new tour t-shirt and her enthusiastic, if uncomprehending, mother.

“Please. You’re holding up the line.” The mother bowed slightly.

“See you again sometime.” The singer waved her fingers gently in a goodbye. “Next year, maybe.”

But the girl had already turned and in mere moments was lost in the jostling crowd.

The singer’s eyes flickered blue for a moment, a strange iris pattern of gears that no one noticed.

Or next century, perhaps.

And then they faded to their usual color. She smiled sweetly at the child and her mother.

“And what would you like me to write...?”

If the smile was a little sad for the next ten families or so, no one noticed or thought to remark on it.

The girl waited at the VIP entrance for the concert to begin. She’d booked out an entire section in the upper gallery for herself because the ghosts needed space, and a few carefully placed investments a long time ago meant that money was rarely an issue. And there was always the family fortune to dip into, if she could bring herself to spend any of it.

Part way through the encore she was sure she’d seen the singer look directly up at her, a hundred-yard stare from blue-green eyes scintillating in the darkness. It was an old song about feelings and family, strangely out of place amidst the poppy cheerfulness, and for a moment she was certain she could feel a hand around hers. There was a girl with long, dark, serious hair sat beside her – but when she turned it was just a mirage, the multi-colored spotlights refracting through teardrops.

Outside the stadium the late-summer Sapporo breezes gently stirred the banners above the entrance.

*Magical Mirai
Hundredth Anniversary Concert*

...

*In our journeys and lives, though they start and they end,
still the road never stops, on forever,
as we reach toward a dream, making memories and friends,
we draw near the people who we love.*

...

"Kawa no nagare no yō ni" - Akimoto Yasushi / Mitake Akira, tr. Larry Kenny

Third Round Decider

Chapter Summary

Old habits die hard...

Happy 3rd Anniversary Kill la Kill!

Vacant eyes of abandoned apartments and empty offices. The road's cracked, an antique tram stalled halfway up a short section of hill, the rails bent and buckled, no power, caught between stations. Behind her the tarmac disappears into the water of Tokyo bay. Like the Great Flood, only the high ground survives now.

They want to make an amusement park out of what's left of it, don't they? That's what *she*'d said. As if Odaiba wasn't enough for one city. Homes, offices and parks. And probably a giant robot at the center of it all. She hopes it'll be Mazinger or better yet Gunbuster, but it'll probably be Evangelion. Everything's Evangelion, these days. She looks up the road, and squinting against Autumn sunlight she can see something that looks like broken arms enfolding the remains of the peak. There's a second light there, she thinks she can see it: a specular highlight, spectacular refraction, a familiar reflection.

Her foot rolls gently, a brass shell casing under a white sneaker. It has her name on it: it's a little piece of spent history.

She could clear the remaining distance to the summit in a single leap, if she wanted, but she walks it – human speed – just a demigoddess with hands pressed deep into the pockets of a well-worn jacket. Besides, best not to fly too close to the sun. Look what happened to that Greek kid. Hot weather, feathers and wax. Did he clutch at them as he fell? Did they whisper to him? *Don't worry. You've outgrown us.* Probably not. But he didn't have someone to catch him though, either.

Trust fall.

She remembers a bad drama class – a good lesson in the end though, she thinks – the other kids chanting: *We'll catch you, Ryuko!* The bright crack as her head hit the floor, her mouth filling red as a wild tooth caught her bottom lip. There's someone ahead who'd have caught a meteor, she knows, someone who'd never have let her fall, and would never have expected thanks, or even half a katsu sandwich in payment on the top of the classroom block over lunchtime.

But they'd always have been a year apart: never sat the same exams, never ran the same races, never together except passing in corridors.

A TV by the side of the road invites all to watch it: the cracked CRT a window onto the world of the summit. She was a star there, once. Saturday afternoon wrestling. Fan service and *super sentai*. Color-coded duelists. She shifts the aerial slightly – force of habit – and turns the dial to her channel. There’s nothing to watch now; the final credits rolled a long time ago. No more “Next week...” or “To be continued...” except in the way everyone’s life is a series, minute-by-minute of new episodes.

But today really is “No Late Day”, so she writes in the dust with one finger, and picks up the pace:

Ryuko Matoi woz 'ere

Best not to keep *her* waiting.

“You’re late.”

Satsuki’s resting against a chunk of fallen concrete, relaxed – truly relaxed now after more than a thousand days – arms folded easily as she watches a familiar silhouette emerge through the remains of the gateway.

“Ya know me. Late for everthin’ but dinner.”

“It wasn’t a complaint.”

She smiles, stretches and stands, rolling her neck with a *crack-crack-crack* Ryuko’s sure she can hear across the arena.

“I was certain you’d beat me here, for once. I had three hours of lectures this morning.”

Ryuko runs fingers lazily through a shock of dark hair and scratches the back of her neck like she’s trying to shake something loose.

“Never thought I’d hear somethin’ like that from you. Swottin’ for finals?”

There’s a flash of color that could almost be a blush: Satsuki’s about to confirm her sister’s worst fears about her.

“Professor Kawaguchi was ill. I had to give the lectures in his place.”

Unbelievable.

It’s a good thing they don’t share a surname, or she’d bring the whole family into repute.

“I swear, Kiryuin... I could’ve not gone to a single lesson my whole life and between us we’d still be the best students in class, on average.”

“Sorry to be such a burden.”

She’s almost laughing, and now it’s Ryuko who folds her arms, tilting her head slyly.

“Yeah. Well, good thing I’ve enough cool for the both of us.”

“You’re most generous with it.” Satsuki interlocks fingers and stretches both arms forward with a little more intensity than appears appropriate for the occasion. “I see you’re wearing your jacket.” There’s something warm and familiar in that. It’s the insignia of another Ryuko, someone utterly infuriating and... it’s good to remember her sometimes. It’s good to let her get under your skin, a little like she used to.

“Special occasions only.” Ryuko picks at a loose thread on one cuff. “Gettin’ a little worn. Don’t wanna be losin’ this too...” That’s not a good memory, but it’s appropriate today. It’s OK to make a little nod at the altar of remembrance – he wouldn’t object to that. He be happy to see them both together.

“But you... ya look like a housewife, Satsuki.” She has to stifle a laugh.

The ensemble isn’t even demure, it’s positively plain. Plain and perfectly fitted – you’d have to work hard to appear so nondescript.

“I’ve shown quite enough skin for one lifetime, I think.”

“It wasn’t a complaint.”

That doesn’t get a response, but her sister turns and begins to unwind the bindings around a canvas-wrapped bundle behind her. When she turns back, she hoists something slender into the air, gracefully, letting it make an easy arc into Ryuko’s right hand. She sweeps the *shinai* around quickly, getting the measure of its heft and balance. It’s red, bright red from tip to pommel, just as the one Satsuki’s holding – purposefully now – is black, black with a white hilt.

“Painted. Nice touch.” Ryuko nods to herself.

“Hououmaru painted them.” Satsuki settles into her stance, letting practical brown flats find purchase among the rubble and fine dust. “She has an admirable attention to detail.”

No option but to laugh at that. Ryuko looks up at clear blue skies, cold and cloudless, and shakes her head.

“Yer all absolutely bonkers.”

“It’s an incomprehensible world, Ryuko.”

Ryuko looks back down with a relaxed sigh: time to get serious. Satsuki’s watching her, and if there’s affection there, it’s well-hidden behind attention and tightly-coiled anticipation.

“So. How did we leave things, Matoi?” She holds her *shinai* in both hands: *Yojimbo*. Her focus would etch tungsten, or split mountains. Difficult not to... someone like that.

Breathtaking. But Ryuko's not a girl to be left gasping.

"One round each, Kiryuin."

"And the usual wager?"

Ryuko lets the *shinai* roll in one hand: undisciplined, unpredictable.

"Yeah. Loser buys dinner."

The remains of Honnouji Academy shift beneath their feet. Pressure begins to build. Out on an artificial island, tectonic plates shift, readying energy for two volcanos.

Say it. You know it's not the same unless you say it.

She can see her sister focusing. She draws in a breath, sucking the life out of dull stone, letting it crumble a year more.

And then she lets it out.

"LIFE FIBER OVERRIDE! KAMUI JUNKETSU!!"

"LIFE FIBER SYNCHRONIZE! KAMUI SENKETSU!!"

The blast buckles the remaining steel superstructures and sends up a plume of smoke that tourists can see from the top of Tokyo Sky Tree. Dust blizzards around them, swirling in a tornado of concrete. But when it settles, it reveals no transformation. Just two young women: a culture-clash of black skinny jeans and Sukajan jacket versus sensible skirt and conservative blouse.

The debris has turned anti-clockwise, though: it's wound back time almost exactly three years.

"You won't get away with just a trip to MOS Burger this time, Matoi!"

"You better have stuffed that wallet with cold, hard, cash, Kiryuin! Dinner's gonna be karaoke and all-you-can-eat spicy ramen tonight!"

Satsuki draws her *shinai* up, ready to parry or strike.

"Don't hold back, Matoi, just because I'm your big sister!"

"As if, Kiryuin!!"

Ryuko leaps, and as she reaches the zenith of her attack for an instant she's sure she sees an old man sitting amongst the rubble of collapsing classrooms. He's laughing, and she can't help but smile with him. She remembers him, and someone he made, and puts everything she has into a strike only one person on Earth could counter.

I like you way too much to go easy on you, Sis.

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